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Firefighters help paramedic program in Loreto

By Eric Michael Stitt

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Eight years ago, the Hermosa Beach Fire Department began making history.

In conjunction with the Hermosa Beach Sister City Association, the HBFD created a paramedic program in Loreto, Mexico, that has given the city a strong emergency care system that has the only certified paramedics in the country.

"They are the only official sanctioned paramedic operation in Mexico," said Paramedic Firefighter Paul Hawkins.

Hawkins said when the HBFD originated the idea of teaching paramedics in Loreto, the city was lacking an emergency response system and the nearest hospital was two hours away.

"They didn't even have a fire department," Hawkins said. "We went down and they created a fire department and it has taken off since. Now 90 percent of their fire department is functioning certified paramedics by us."

Hawkins and a couple of other Hermosa Beach firefighters go down to Loreto at least twice a year to work with the city's paramedic program.

"It's been remarkable how the community has embraced the program," said Capt. Mike Garofano, who has been a part of the paramedic program since its inception.

Recently Hawkins and Garofano were able to teach Loreto paramedics how to use the "jaws of life." Garofano said this training was vital because there is a significant amount of auto accidents in Loreto and this newly acquired knowledge quickly became amazingly effective in a short amount of time."

Hawkins said the aspiring paramedics are some of the most eager students he's ever taught.

"They're the best students," Hawkins said. "They're so hungry for learning, which makes teaching very rewarding."

Their enthusiasm reminds him of how he was when he first became a paramedic nearly 30 years ago. It was a new concept in America then and it's now a new idea in Mexico. Hawkins sees the same level of energy he had in the Loreto students.

"They have a pioneer spirit, a sense of pride & a level of dedication," Hawkins said. "For us it felt like we were doing something revolutionary. They're riding a wave of that feeling and I plan on capitalizing on it."

They've certified eight paramedics so far, which is just one phase of their plan. Hawkins said the Fire Department's goal is to certify as many firefighters as possible, offer continuing education and eventually see that Loreto has its own paramedic school someday. But for now, they will continue to help improve the town's emergency response system one firefighter at a time.

Looking at this program from a historical aspect, Garofano said he feels fortunate to be able to help provide a town with the type of resources similar to what's available in Hermosa Beach.

"We supplied a vocation that I'm proud to be a part of and to step back and look at what's developed gives me a source of pride," Garofano said. "It gives me an enormous sense of pride just being a part of it. It's one of the most rewarding things I've ever done in my career."

The HBSCA is having a fund-raiser Saturday, July 14, from 5 to 10 p.m. at the Hermosa Beach Community Center to help support the paramedic program. Tickets are \$50 per person. Because of this, the HBFD will be able to continue its program in Loreto. For tickets, call (310) 376-2836.